

EXTENSIONS OF REMARKS

THE UNITED NATIONS CONFERENCE ON WOMEN IN BEIJING—SUCCESSFUL ASSESSMENT GIVEN BY JOURNALIST JUDY WOODRUFF

HON. TOM LANTOS

OF CALIFORNIA

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Tuesday, October 10, 1995

Mr. LANTOS. Mr. Speaker, United States participation in the United Nations Conference on Women, which was held in Beijing in early September, was far more controversial in the United States than it should have been. Questions were raised about the appropriateness of American participation because the conference was held in China and, clearly, the human rights record of the Beijing regime is appalling. Others expressed concern about the supposedly "radical" agenda of the conference.

Mr. Speaker, I defended United States participation in the conference as appropriate and useful in several International Relations Committee hearings on that issue. I feel strongly that participation was in our interest. This was a U.N. conference, not a Chinese conference. The agenda and the procedures were agreed to by the member states of the United Nations, not dictated by the Chinese Government.

I personally opposed the decision of the Bush Administration to accept Beijing as the site of the conference. But I recognize that it was the executive branch's prerogative to make that decision. Those who argued that we should have refused to participate ignored the fact that our absence would have been detrimental to our Nation's standing in the world and would have eliminated all possibility of our influencing the work of the conference in galvanizing the international community into meaningful action to advance the status of women.

Mr. Speaker, many countries shared the concerns that were expressed about U.S. participation, but they decided that the best option was to go to Beijing and engage in the most open forum possible under the circumstances. We fully realized that the Chinese would attempt to place severe limits on freedom of action, and they did so. At the same time, however, our delegates protested these violations of internationally recognized rights.

Our presence in Beijing and the presence in Beijing of a large gathering of non-Chinese from all over the world had important repercussions on that very closed society. The voices of our American participants were heard, and our American women brought to the conference unparalleled commitment, expertise, experience, vision, and the passionate commitment to a free and open society.

Mr. Speaker, Judy Woodruff, an outstanding journalist and an anchor and senior correspondent of CNN, was one of the many international correspondents who attended and reported on the U.N. Conference on

Women in Beijing. In the Washington Post, October 1, 1995 she gave her assessment of the conference. Ms. Woodruff has given us an excellent evaluation of the results of the conference. Mr. Speaker, I ask that Ms. Woodruff's article be placed in the RECORD and I urge my colleagues to give careful attention to her thoughtful views.

[From the Washington Post, Oct. 1, 1995]

BEIJING: A REAL PICTURE . . .

(By Judy Woodruff)

Since returning earlier this month from 2½ weeks of covering the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, I have been repeatedly asked what it was like to arm-wrestle muscular Chinese security men amid nude protesters while reporting on the dominant issue of lesbian rights.

The Chinese police, uniformed and plainclothed, were ubiquitous, carrying out the orders of a government determined to minimize contact between foreigners and the Chinese population. The security was at times oppressive; there were hall "monitors" in most hotels. Buses were unreliable and conditions were especially difficult in Huairou, where the 32,000 nongovernmental organization (NGO) delegates were forced to gather, largely isolated, as the Chinese had wanted. All of them put up with relentless rain and ankle-deep mud in order to move from one workshop to another.

But the picture, fed by conservative critics, of a festival of radical feminism where ideas germinated in the West were spread aggressively among wide-eyed disciples from the rest of the world, didn't match the conference that I covered. Despite some of China's anti-women practices—a one-child policy that has led to frequent abortion of female fetuses, for example—it was fitting the conference was held in the world's most populous and dynamic continent. The Far Eastern Economic Review—hardly a beacon of radicalism—noted: "Just as Asia has outstripped the rest of the world in economic growth, so too has the continent experienced more than its share of the attendant social dislocations and what is termed in conference jargon the 'feminization' of poverty."

Indeed what the Beijing conference really was about was tens of thousands of women—and more than a handful of supportive men—who raised the money and carved out time to travel long distances to discuss and exchange valuable information about their work promoting health, education, and economic opportunity for women and girls and preventing violence. Some whom I met and interviewed for CNN were particularly memorable.

Merab Kiremire of Lusaka, Zambia, who three years ago started a program to give prostitutes information and skills to get them off the streets and into jobs. "I want to tell the world," Kiremire said, "that a lot of African women go into prostitution not because they want to but because they have no other alternatives." Since 1992, Kiremire has helped more than 150 prostitutes move to different occupations but also has seen dozens of women become sick with HIV infections, some of whom have died. She is a passionate advocate of the need to devote more resources to women's health and education.

Stories of violence against women and exploitation of women were pervasive at the

conference, both at the formal U.N. session and at the NGO meeting. Jacqueline Pitanguy of Rio de Janeiro runs an organization that tries to help domestic workers, who she says are paid little for their long hours, yet are devalued by society and physically isolated, making it hard for them to speak out about their plight. Back in Rio, she told me the conference Platform for Action "gives us international legitimacy . . . so in moments of difficulty . . . [public policy makers can't argue] what I'm saying is crazy; it can be supported by a document to which my country has agreed."

Among the many remarkable mothers and daughters who came together to the conference were Estefania Aldaba-Lim and her daughter, Cecilia Lazaro, from Manila. Aldaba-Lim, an official delegate and a former minister of social development and welfare in the Philippines, told riveting stories about her work during the past two decades with the "marginalized members of the population," the more than 55 percent of women in her country who are impoverished. They have been victims of incest, abuse and violence in the home; many have been forced to migrate to the United States and elsewhere to work as domestics to send money back to support the families they left behind. Anyone who doesn't understand the pain of a young mother leaving her children behind in order to try to provide some minimal economic security, ought to talk with Aldaba-Lim and Lazaro. The daughter, a television journalist, is just as eloquent: She says her mother, who was widowed at an early age, is her role model—a woman of privilege who has worked tirelessly for the less fortunate of her country.

Despite tight restrictions, the sessions had a visible effect on some Chinese women there. Chen Shu Yun, from the ancient capital of Xian, is a senior engineer and international trade specialist who is on the standing committee of the provincial people's congress in her home. Steering clear of publicized controversies in her country, Chen nevertheless came away determined to help women get better access to schooling and jobs. "Before this, I didn't pay enough attention to women's problems," she said, adding she plans to go back to her provincial government and suggest "a special group for the women's affairs. We have the special group . . . for the economic, for the industry, for the foreign affairs, but not for the women affairs."

To the skeptics who dismiss the Beijing conference as an inconsequential event in the world of serious international affairs, that will be true only if international and grass-roots organizations don't hold governments accountable. And to those who argue there was a dangerous political agenda at work, that is true only if you believe there is something dangerous about helping 70 percent of the world's poor, who happen to be women.

• This "bullet" symbol identifies statements or insertions which are not spoken by a Member of the Senate on the floor.

Matter set in this typeface indicates words inserted or appended, rather than spoken, by a Member of the House on the floor.